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## A Risk-Based Approach to Strategic Balance

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## **CARLISLE PAPER**

### **A RISK-BASED APPROACH TO STRATEGIC BALANCE**

**John A. Mauk**

**December 2010**

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## PREFACE

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Antulio J. Echevarria II', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

ANTULIO J. ECHEVARRIA II  
Director of Research  
Strategic Studies Institute

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

JOHN A MAUK, a colonel in the U.S. Army, is currently a member of the faculty of the U.S. Army War College. He is a field artillery officer and an operations research analyst who most recently served on the Army Staff in the G-3 and as a Military Assistant to the Deputy Under Secretary of the Army for Operations Research. He has also served as a strategist on the Multi-National Force-Iraq Headquarters Staff in the U.S. Embassy, Baghdad, in 2006. He is currently researching the national security policy formulation process and developing a risk-based decision support framework for U.S. security policy formulation. Colonel Mauk is a 2010 graduate of the U.S. Army War College.

## ABSTRACT

The United States requires a national security strategy and a force posture that reflect the nation's economic and emotional capacity to implement the strategy. Recently published strategic concepts fail to accommodate these requirements. Current Secretary of Defense guidance to the Services is to develop a strategically balanced joint force capable of spanning the full spectrum of conflict. The U.S. Joint Forces Command interpretation of the Department of Defense vision is to expand military capability in an economic environment where defense budgets will almost certainly contract. In response, U.S. Joint Force and Army Capstone Concepts articulate development of a force that is not optimized toward specific threats but rather depends on rapid adaptability to threats as they are revealed. These concepts demand vigorous debate on their risk and affordability implications. This paper explores a risk-based approach to a strategically balanced force that assesses alternative postures and the viability of competing force concepts in mitigating national risk in a resource-constrained environment. This assessment also examines alternate definitions of balance and the continued relevance of U.S. conventional capabilities and nuclear deterrence.





## A RISK-BASED APPROACH TO STRATEGIC BALANCE

An extended recession and rapidly growing national debt in excess of \$12 trillion are clear signals that the nation's capacity to support current foreign policy and conflict has limits.<sup>1</sup> The nation's economic disposition is a compelling indicator that the United States can no longer afford to enter into or sustain conflicts like the costly nation-building efforts in which we are currently engaged. Through this economic lens, current U.S. strategic direction fails to fully consider national values, resource capacity, and risk implications of the envisioned force posture in the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR), the *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations* (CCJO) and the *Army Capstone Concept* (ACC). The current CCJO describes the security environment as an era of persistent conflict characterized by great uncertainty, growing volatility, and an increasingly complex range of threats spanning the spectrum of conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Given this environment, this CCJO logically predicts that the nature of conflict for the foreseeable future will be a mix of complex irregular, hybrid, and unconventional capabilities employed simultaneously along the full spectrum of conflict. In response, Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) Robert Gates has directed development of a full spectrum, strategically balanced force concept that possesses a robust irregular warfare capability on par with U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities.<sup>3</sup> Strategic balance is described in the CCJO as a flexible force structure that depends on rapid adaptability to threats.<sup>4</sup> In this concept, adaptability is a central force characteristic that acknowledges that predicting and preparing for every threat is unrealistic.<sup>5</sup> The CCJO recognizes that major war remains the greatest potential threat to the nation's security.<sup>6</sup> However, it advocates maintaining competency in U.S. conventional capabilities while assuming that the prospect of high-intensity conventional conflict is greatly reduced, while the likelihood of irregular conflict is guaranteed.<sup>7</sup> The ACC echoes these ideas. Additionally, the concept advocates an expansion of security force assistance, counterinsurgency (COIN), and irregular capabilities, while accepting risk in high-intensity combat capabilities.<sup>8</sup> Success of this concept is also underpinned by the assumption that both U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities remain strong deterrents to adversaries who might consider conventional or nuclear options.<sup>9</sup> In sum, the CCJO concept proposes to recapitalize, modernize, and expand U.S. capabilities in an era when the Department of Defense (DoD) should realistically expect reduced budgets.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the DoD has clearly acknowledged the likelihood of flat or reduced budgets.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Congressional Budget Office projections through 2028 anticipate cuts in defense budgets.<sup>12</sup>

This strategic concept demands diligent critique and debate. The CCJO concept dictates strategic direction that may be based on flawed ideas and assumptions that fail to realistically consider: (1) the affordability of the concept; (2) the relevant risks to national security in adopting the envisioned posture; and (3) the current viability of U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities. If formulation of grand strategy depends on the calculation and development of economic and emotional resources to support it, the CCJO failure to relate ends and means in security strategy invites tremendous risk to the military's ability to protect national interests.<sup>13</sup>

Failure to acknowledge economic realities aside, the CCJO also reflects a broad but unstated assumption that U.S. foreign policy will continue to support the need for a

large forward deployed contingency force. This assumption may not be valid; Obama administration actions with stimulus packages and the proposed lifting of George W. Bush-era tax cuts are clear indications that economic and domestic realities are central national priorities. Likewise, the Obama administration has articulated opposition to a policy of nation-building and a clear intent to extricate the United States from both Iraq and Afghanistan. These positions may indicate adoption of a more conservative and less costly foreign policy. Also, U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities may not currently be the effective strategic deterrents they once were. U.S. conventional capability has dangerously atrophied as the result of nearly 9 years of focus on unconventional warfare. Similarly, the U.S. nuclear capability is a rapidly aging Cold War-era arsenal that requires modernization.<sup>14</sup> A nuclear capability serves as a deterrent only if it is composed of a reliable capability that other powers respect and in which threats fear reprisal. Arguably, U.S. nuclear capability represents very little deterrent to terrorists.

In essence, the DoD is basing security strategy on critically important ideas and assumptions that, if wrong, significantly weaken national security. An equally critical weakness of this concept is its lack of a clear articulation of threats in defense of budgetary requests to Congress. The QDR, CCJO, and ACC all fall short in this regard. These documents collectively forward a security concept not focused on any specific threat, nor optimized for any specific mission that argues for a flexible and rapidly adaptable force to defend against a broad range of potential threats. This concept is problematic for determining service equipping, manning, or training priorities. More importantly, undefined and ambiguous threats make defending budgets difficult. Additionally, future security strategy and associated operating concepts must fully consider the adverse impact that extended conflict has had on U.S. readiness. Finally, future security strategy must accommodate steadily eroding national capacity and resolve to support current foreign policy.

### **Matching Forces to Threats: The Complexity of Risk Management.**

DoD guidance in the QDR specifically chooses to emphasize resource allocation toward current conflicts. In doing so, the DoD is consciously accepting risk in the development of future force capabilities.<sup>15</sup> This is too great and potentially too expensive a risk to take. A more conservative foreign policy, that is, one which seeks to avoid Iraq/Afghanistan-type engagements, would enable the nation to better refocus its DoD resources. Adoption of a more conservative foreign policy would ideally translate into a reduced likelihood of U.S. commitment of military force to support stabilization and nation-building missions. By avoiding these types of endeavors, the nation also avoids engagement in difficult and costly counterinsurgencies. The DoD could then refocus force posture debate on the most compelling threats to national interests rather than the most likely types of conflict predicted in the QDR and CCJO.<sup>16</sup> However, so long as U.S. foreign policy remains unchanged, senior military leadership will feel compelled to develop a force capable of spanning the spectrum of conflict in a manner that may not be affordable in the long term and serves to dilute U.S. strengths.<sup>17</sup>

A more conservative foreign policy does not diminish U.S. leadership nor presume to entirely eliminate engagement and promotion of democratic values; but more conservative

policy prudently assumes less risk of entering into expensive conflicts while the United States addresses compelling domestic and economic challenges. A more conservative policy might also serve to satisfy the international expectations of the new administration for more inclusive partnering, and reduce the perception that has developed over the past decade of the United States as hegemonic, arrogant, short-sighted, and reckless.<sup>18</sup>

Regardless of current policy, recent conflicts serve to overly influence collective military professional judgment on the development of a future force posture. Arguably, the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq do not represent threats to vital U.S. interests. Yet senior leadership is forwarding a security concept that makes these types of conflicts central drivers of force posture. A vital interest in this context, as defined by noted Foreign Policy expert Donald Nuechterlein, is "... where probable serious harm to the security and well-being of the nation will result if strong measures, including military ones, are not taken by the government within a short period of time."<sup>19</sup> In this perspective, prudence demands that the United States emphasize force capabilities to counter those threats that pose the greatest national risk, while maintaining the capacity to adapt toward lesser threats. The most dangerous threats to U.S. national interests and armed forces are reflected in Figure 1.<sup>20</sup> This graphic depiction of the risk continuum reflects the potential impact of various threats relative to national interests and military combat power. This perspective clearly identifies major combat operations, nuclear deterrence, and homeland defense as interests on which the nation's security posture should be focused and its military capabilities emphasized in a constrained resource environment.



**Figure 1. Balancing the Future Force to Meet National Needs:  
The Complexity of Risk Management.**

Review of the QDR, CCJO, and latest ACC reflect just the opposite approach to risk. These sources of strategic guidance argue for more robust irregular and unconventional capabilities based on debatable assumptions about conventional and nuclear readiness and prospects for future conflict. These documents serve to collectively distract the DoD from strategic focus on a force posture firmly grounded in national interests, values, risk and economic reality.

Cited economic, domestic, and readiness challenges require that future U.S. security strategy refocus on vital U.S. interests if the strategy is to be viable and sustainable. This requirement likely means the SECDEF's intent for a full-spectrum capability will be unaffordable as envisioned in the CCJO.<sup>21</sup> This also means the Army's intent for a full-spectrum capability, as envisioned in the ACC, will be unaffordable and requires critical review.<sup>22</sup> This concept arguably accepts risk across the spectrum, and the key issue for senior leaders is how the Army might balance capabilities to mitigate risk.

The definition of strategic balance in a context that appropriately considers national risk and affordability is essential. The dilemma for the United States going forward is in determining what strategic balance means in this environment and how it might be achieved with significantly constrained resources. This requires evaluation of alternate definitions of balance and their implications. This evaluation must begin with the competing elements of balance: national values, interests, and the capacity to support them.

### **U.S. Values, Interests, and Resource Capacity.**

Our uniquely American form of democracy centers on a core set of values and expectations embodied in the Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, and the Constitution. The national resolve to protect these freedoms has been regularly tested and reaffirmed in blood throughout our history. Because a belief in this powerful set of values and a commitment to protect them is so strong, the nation has been successful in maintaining a professional, all-volunteer force. The military's demonstrated commitment to defend the nation and its interests has engendered a great bond of trust with the American people who view military leaders as professionals. As such, the population has entrusted military leadership with a remarkable degree of confidence and professional latitude in stewardship of the nation's livelihood. The population expects the military to deter threats to U.S. interests, to defend the homeland and economic well-being, and, if the military must fight, the nation expects it to win. These represent the military's core responsibilities to the nation.

The nation also has a reasonable expectation of responsible stewardship of its tax dollars employed in defense. The extent to which the military may provide security and support U.S. policy in the future rests in the capacity of national wealth and the citizenry's tolerance for the cost of policy. Great national wealth has enabled the United States to liberally exercise what the nation writ large has accepted as a global responsibility to defend and promote democratic values abroad. The effects of the current recession and growing national debt are clear indications that U.S. resource capacity to continue to do so is now more constrained than the national reservoir of goodwill. Additionally, current conflicts have contributed to a great financial burden of debt on future generations of



Americans. Going forward, formulation of security strategy requires renewed focus on a balance of national values, interests, and fiscal tolerance. Focus on these factors demands a renewed emphasis on priorities and discrete qualification of interests.

It is with these considerations in mind that a discussion of the *National Security Strategy* (NSS) implications to the posture of U.S. armed forces is required. The NSS drives DoD concepts to support it and therefore drives service force posture. This policy has significant implications for the nation's armed forces in terms of readiness and acceptance of risk. Arguably, current and past administrations have required the military to execute operations in Afghanistan and Iraq to implement a policy that is not focused on vital national interests and serves to distract focus on core obligations to the nation. In short, the effect of this policy is increased risk to national security through erosion of military preparedness for high-intensity warfare.<sup>23</sup> President Barack Obama has made the Afghanistan conflict his military priority and in doing so, has continued, at least in the near term, the Bush administration idea of nation-building. This extended focus on stabilization, nation-building, and COIN operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has denied U.S. forces the ability to conduct meaningful conventional combined arms training for nearly 10 years.<sup>24</sup> Effective combined arms operations require a high level and frequency of training to achieve the synchronized effects desired and to sustain them. Experienced military professionals understand the implications of the current state of atrophy of our combined arms capabilities for a high-intensity fight. The United States can ill afford to lose conventional dominance as an effective deterrent.<sup>25</sup>

High-intensity combined arms training develops the capabilities the nation requires most to defend against complex hybrid and conventional threats.<sup>26</sup> Also, the U.S. nuclear arsenal has not been modernized in over 30 years, while other nuclear powers have continued to do so.<sup>27</sup> The dramatic erosion of U.S. military conventional training readiness and an aged nuclear deterrence represent increased national risk. Nine years of warfare has also stretched the resilience of the force, which calls into question the military's current capacity to defend against near-peer threats that may have aspirations that truly threaten U.S. interests.<sup>28</sup>

The genesis of the current military readiness predicament and the unstable global security environment may have their origin in U.S. over reaction to the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001 (9/11). U.S. declaration of a global war on terror (GWOT) served to elevate terrorists to the same but unwarranted level of recognition as nation-states. As recent terror attempts have revealed, U.S. GWOT efforts have not translated into a reduced threat from terrorism.<sup>29</sup> Al Qaeda has simply expanded its operations to other parts of the region and North Africa. The organization remains a growing, evolving threat that will require engagement across the globe for the foreseeable future.

Ironically, al Qaeda is effectively employing a strategy against the West similar to the strategy the West employed to win the Cold War. The West succeeded in forcing the Soviet Union to spend itself into economic failure over time. Similarly, the United States is spending vast amounts of resources to combat al Qaeda, which has to comparatively spend very few resources to achieve a significant strategic effect. The Congressional Budget Office estimates the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to be in excess of \$2.7 trillion.<sup>30</sup> The continuing costs of these wars will further exacerbate the rapidly growing U.S. debt that President Obama has characterized as a compelling national viability issue.

The national debt has security implications. U.S. economic and domestic challenges mean that U.S. capacity to simultaneously conduct security engagement, counter terror, repair conventional and nuclear readiness, and modernize the force makes achieving a balanced approach to risk a difficult challenge.

### **Assessing the Threat Environment and Identifying Priorities.**

A renewed approach to a balanced force posture should begin with a comprehensive appraisal of the security environment to identify and prioritize U.S. interests and threats to these interests in terms of risk. This type of assessment requires a systems approach to accommodate the great number of environmental variables to be considered. The intent is to qualify facts about the security environment in terms of what is or is not known, what is assumed, and ultimately, to identify what is most important to the nation. Interests must then be considered in the context of national values and relative risk. A systems approach like this is useful to formulate effectively the critical ends, ways and means of a viable strategy and alternative approaches to balance.<sup>31</sup>

### **Relevant Historical Facts.**

History illustrates that U.S. nuclear, air, naval, and conventional combined arms capabilities have been effective deterrents to major interstate conflict since World War II. Also, the U.S. Army demonstrated a great deal of flexibility and swiftly adapted a conventionally oriented ground force into a preeminent COIN capability over a relatively short period from 2005 to 2009.

### **Relevant Assumptions About the Current State of the U.S. Security Posture.**

Despite 8 years of atrophy, it remains reasonable to assume that U.S. conventional capabilities will continue to inhibit the way potential adversaries choose to fight us in the near term.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, U.S. strategic nuclear, air, and naval capabilities will continue to inhibit threat options for military confrontation. While other nations may be closing the gap and are capable of technological surprise, the United States is paying close attention to this possibility and continues to enjoy some technological advantage over potential threats.<sup>33</sup>

### **Defining U.S. Interests.**

Before attempting to identify an appropriate and viable posture by which to secure U.S. interests, it is necessary to discuss how U.S. interests are defined and prioritized. Noted political scientist and foreign policy expert Donald Neuchterlein offers a useful approach by which to assess levels of interest. This approach categorizes interests in basic terms and then employs a transitory categorization that prioritizes interests according to the amount of value or level of intensity a nation invests in them. Neuchterlein offers four basic categories of interests, listed in priority, that are constants in measuring interest levels.<sup>34</sup>

1. Defense of the Homeland: "Protection of the people, territory, and institutions of the United States against potential foreign dangers."
2. Economic Well-being: "Promotion of U.S. international trade and investment, including protection of private interests in foreign countries."
3. Favorable World Order: "Establishment of a peaceful international environment in which disputes between nations can be resolved without resort to war and in which collective security rather than unilateral action is employed."
4. Promotion of Values: "Promulgation of a set of values that U.S. leaders believe to be universally good and worthy of emulating by other countries."

Neuchterlein also offers a transitory scale of priority to reflect changes in the level of intensity or value associated with a basic interest category:<sup>35</sup>

1. Survival Interest: "... where the very existence of the nation is in peril."
2. Vital Interest: "... where probable serious harm to the security and well-being of the nation will result if strong measures, including military ones, are not taken by the government within a short period of time."
3. Major Interest: "... where potential serious harm could come to the nation if no action is taken to counter an unfavorable trend abroad."
4. Peripheral Interest: "... where little if any harm to the entire nation will result if a 'wait and see' policy is adopted."

Neuchterlein asserts that clear differentiation may be made between these transitory categories by the amount of time a nation has to reach a decision on a specific course of action, and its tolerance for the cost of the decision.<sup>36</sup> It is not surprising that interpretation of levels of intensity associated with any interest may change from administration to administration.<sup>37</sup> This means that a vital national interest may become only a major interest in a new administration, or vice versa. The value of this model is it that it provides a flexible framework by which to view national interest levels in perspective.

In accordance with Neuchterlein's definitions, currently known threats to U.S. interests do not meet the "survival" definition. While peers possess nuclear and conventional capabilities that could significantly harm the United States, none appears to threaten the United States directly, and so they may be reasonably defined as "vital." Whether or not the terror threat emanating from Afghanistan or the weapons of mass destruction threat in Iraq rose to the level of vital national interests is debatable. The core issue with these types of threats is in how best to address them and the immediacy of doing so. The utility of Neuchterlein's model is that it provides a rational framework to qualify the intensity of threats. When viewed through the lens of this model, had the Bush National Security Council conducted this type of interest assessment as a prerequisite to policymaking prior to 2001, the administration would likely have pursued a more reasoned response to the threats in Afghanistan and Iraq. A more reasoned approach would likely have avoided the costly and extended stabilization and nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is essential for the new administration to revisit U.S. national interests prior to developing or implementing security policy, and to revalidate the transitory definitions associated with them to reestablish clear priorities. A future of increasingly constrained resources demands renewed emphasis on security policy focused on only the highest

priority U.S. interests. Doing so enables the development of viable operational concepts, the identification of associated risk, and informed decisions about where along the spectrum of conflict to accept risk.

Threats that pose a significant risk to U.S. vital interests are readily apparent in some cases. Russia retains a large conventional and nuclear capability that could rapidly and dramatically threaten vital U.S. interests. An economic, conventional, and nuclear power, China also represents a threat that could dramatically endanger vital U.S. interests. North Korea is an example of a somewhat less clear threat that, while clearly dangerous and destabilizing, could meet different transitory definitions of interest. It is precisely the uncertainty and complexity associated with categorizing potential threats to U.S. interests that poses the most difficult security policymaking problems.

Truly vital threats may be clearly and rationally identified through the consideration of a threat's capacity to damage the nation's interests and/or armed forces and a clear intent that opposes U.S. interests.<sup>38</sup> These threats may be both hybrid and conventional in nature and include both nation-state and nonstate actors. In this context, North Korean actions and intent clearly qualify the nation as a threat to vital U.S. interests. Consideration of the great number of potential hybrid, conventional, and nuclear threats makes a clear and logical case that the United States must retain superior conventional and nuclear capabilities. These capabilities continue to represent critical deterrents, and, failing deterrence, decisive capabilities by which to ensure defense of national interests. The graphic depiction of these types of threats presented previously in Figure 1 logically directs security focus along the spectrum of conflict. The graphic provides clear insight into where the United States should emphasize capabilities in a balanced force posture, and where the United States might accept risk.

### **Alternative Definitions of Balance.**

There are alternative concepts to consider in posturing U.S. forces for a future of hybrid and complex irregular threats that also continue to emphasize readiness for conventional and nuclear ones to varying degrees. Popular competing perspectives include: (1) a force postured predominantly towards COIN; (2) one oriented toward major combat operations (MCO); (3) a position that advocates a broad full-spectrum capability; and (4) one that advocates a division of joint labor.<sup>39</sup> In the latter model, the United States would field a joint capability with each service focused on a portion of the spectrum of conflict. This model proposes that the Navy and Air Force are postured for MCO contingencies at the high end of the spectrum, while the Army and Marines emphasize their force posture from the middle to low end. This course of action consciously accepts operational risk in ground force readiness to conduct high-intensity combined arms operations. Doing so provides less joint capacity in conventional and MCO scenarios, and demands no Air Force or Navy adaptation to support stability operations.

In force posture (1), the intent to emphasize Army posture left on the spectrum toward security force assistance, COIN, and stability operations assumes risk to the Army's ability to counter hybrid or conventional threats.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, assuming a posture weighted toward major combat operations may appear to ignore the hard lessons relearned in Iraq and Afghanistan on the value of irregular capabilities. It is the prospect of confronting



this broad spectrum of threats with a force postured too heavily toward one end of the spectrum or the other that fuels the current debate on future doctrine.

The recently published ACC describes the need to span the entire spectrum of conflict and to develop an adaptable multiweight force capable of doing so. The document articulates the need for a superior conventional capability, *while* emphasizing the myriad of stability, irregular, and hybrid challenges the force must be prepared to counter. This intent appears to ignore the nation's economic environment and expectations of reduced defense budgets. The envisioned full-spectrum capability, given expected resource realities, may spread the force unacceptably thin. Andrew Krepinevich of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments refers to this concept as an operationally risky one that posits an Army that is a "jack-of-all-trades, and clearly master-of-none."<sup>41</sup> This is a valid concern the Army should closely consider. Reassessment of competing priorities and resources is necessary to ensure the development of a balanced concept that accommodates acceptable risk. This is a resource allocation problem that forces hard decisions in equipping, training emphasis, and manning.

Prior to 2001, U.S. ground forces accepted risk at the low end of the spectrum of conflict so as to develop and maintain a dominant edge in conventional capability. This approach offset the most potentially dangerous threats to national security. Since 2001, U.S. conflicts have produced strong advocates for emphasis on unconventional capabilities. Their position anticipates that current conflicts are the most likely type in which the United States will engage in the future.<sup>42</sup> As such, emerging U.S. doctrine forwards the idea of increased security force assistance and capacity building as a mitigating approach to security issues. The idea is that mitigating potential conflicts is less costly than the use of force required to end them. From a risk perspective, this is not a validated concept on which to base future U.S. security. The idea of emphasizing irregular capabilities is a highly risky proposition. The result of applying reduced resources toward irregular capabilities will be further erosion of conventional dominance and increased national risk.

### **A Logical Approach to Strategic Balance.**

The need to balance acceptable risk and affordable capabilities in an era of reduced budgets demands that the U.S. military sensibly recapitalize and leverage its current strengths. There remain cost effective, viable approaches to strategic balance and readiness that address threats across the spectrum of conflict. There is merit to exploring recapitalization strategies that avoid significant modernization in the mid-term to permit the United States to focus precious dollars on immediate and compelling economic and domestic needs. An approach that makes good sense is one that embraces, rebuilds, and maintains U.S. nuclear and conventional superiority, and recognizes what these mean to the prospect of future warfare. Australia's Brigadier General Michael Krause proposes that U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities have "prescribed the way in which future wars will be fought."<sup>43</sup> This position recognizes critical U.S. strengths that force potential adversaries to employ irregular and hybrid tactics to circumvent superior U.S. combined arms strengths. It provides a strong rationale for an Army postured toward the high end of the spectrum of conflict.

Emphasizing a posture toward the high-intensity end of the spectrum of conflict has consequences. The idea of deliberately shaping future conflict to accept complex irregular warfare is a rather unnerving prospect, given a force postured for high-intensity conflict. The proliferation of increasingly cheaper lethal technologies, growing nationalism, persistent extremist ideologies, and economic haves and have-nots are a recipe for strong anti-American sentiment that portends persistent conflict with U.S. national interests. A high-intensity posture requires U.S. forces to adapt to unconventional or irregular threats as they arise. However, this posture accepts less risk than one in which U.S. forces are required to adapt rapidly to a high intensity fight where time and space are a dangerous disadvantage. While a complex mix of irregular and hybrid conflict may be what experts expect, given the increasingly complex and dynamic threat environment, identifying the next conflict is extremely difficult. The recent Russian incursion into Georgia with a predominantly heavy force is a timely example that there remain significant armor-heavy forces capable of rapidly threatening U.S. interests. It follows, then, that the United States should attempt to maintain and leverage current advantages to narrow threat options and mitigate uncertainty. This approach imposes a modicum of certainty in that it shapes the way future threats will choose to oppose the United States.

While adapting to irregular conflicts may be painful, it is more painful to adapt to MCO by orders of magnitude. U.S. experience in the Kasserine Pass in Tunisia in 1943 demonstrate the consequences of being unprepared for a high-intensity fight and the potential for heavy losses in a short time.<sup>44</sup> Failing to recall the painful lessons of World War II, the United States again sent a poorly prepared Task Force Smith into Korea in 1950, with devastating results.<sup>45</sup> Senior leadership must again consider that near-peer competitors may choose to enter into a conventional fight, should the United States permit continued erosion of its high-intensity capabilities. In this environment, an unprepared U.S. force may not get a second chance to fail. It is a reasonable assertion that potential threats understand the historical implications of giving the U.S. forces time to react and adapt. It follows then that threats will do all they can to deny the United States the space and time to do so. This likelihood is further rationale for emphasizing a force weighted toward MCO.

In this paradigm, it is logical to expect that adversaries will be forced to employ complex irregular and hybrid tactics rather than engage the United States in a conventional combined arms fight. The recent Russia-Georgia and Israeli-Lebanese Hezbollah conflicts provide keen insights into how potential threats are likely to engage U.S. forces in the future. The mix of conventional and irregular tactics and high-tech weaponry employed in these two conflicts makes preparing for threats like them a significant challenge.<sup>46</sup> A force postured toward MCO possesses the necessary combat power to counter these threats. However, a dominant conventional posture does not diminish the significant training challenge to ensure readiness for a broad range of threats. These challenges illustrate that there are no easy solutions in posturing for the future force for cross-spectrum effectiveness. These challenges are further incentive for the United States to be more deliberate in developing security policy and increasingly judicious about which interests are truly vital and where the nation chooses to engage in conflict.

## **An Approach to an Affordable Force Posture.**

Noted military historian Sir Michael Howard states that in developing security strategy, the objective is “to not get it too far wrong.”<sup>47</sup> It is with Howard’s sensible perspective in mind that viable approaches to operational concepts and force structure may be further developed. An approach to balance that emphasizes a superior conventional capability that still possesses critically important unconventional capabilities is essential and achievable. COIN advocates who would argue that general-purpose forces are not capable of conducting successful COIN operations ignore the fact that general-purpose forces have done so to great effect in Iraq and Afghanistan. Readiness for COIN, stability, and other security force assistance operations is clearly a training issue that may be emphasized as required.

As discussed, recent conflicts clearly demonstrate irregular, conventional, and hybrid threats to U.S. interests, including current experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the recent Russian incursion into Georgia. Given this knowledge, a capability that postures the force too far toward either end of the spectrum accepts risk at the other. The difficult decisions are those in which the United States accepts risk, and it makes good sense to accept risk at the low-intensity end of the spectrum. Senior leadership agrees. U.S. Joint Forces (USJFCOM) Commander General James Mattis, in a March 2009 statement to the House Armed Services Committee, testified that, “Based on current needs of the joint force, the findings of the Joint Operating Environment (JOE) 2008, and the guidance provided by the CCJO, USJFCOM will move swiftly to make irregular warfare a core competency of our military,” but will do so “without losing conventional or nuclear superiority.”<sup>48</sup> Acknowledgement of the requirement to achieve both is important, but the hard questions about how to resource all of these capabilities have yet to be answered. We know from experience that the United States can continue to rely on the prescriptive conventional and nuclear approach to U.S. force posture that has proven to narrow threat options in an affordable way. This can be achieved by recapitalizing current capabilities with strict restraint on modernization. This approach to security posture permits the nation to accept flattened defense budgets for a prudent period of time to address compelling economic and domestic concerns.

## **Risk and Ensuring that Security Strategy is “Not Too Wrong.”**

Despite the best efforts of the DoD to assess the threat environment and attempt to forecast the outcome of potential conflicts, analytical endeavors have largely failed to sufficiently anticipate threat responses in recent U.S. engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. These shortcomings are perceived by many as strategic and professional failures of a general officer corps entrusted with defense of the nation.<sup>49</sup> Whether or not these are accurate characterizations, perceptions matter. The unanticipated nature of current conflicts serves to further exacerbate our uncertainty about predicting outcomes of warfare and highlights the implications of getting them wrong. Costly planning errors in current conflicts speak directly to the continuing challenges the United States faces in formulating viable and affordable security policy. Senior leadership appears to remain captive to this type of analysis which predicts predominantly irregular and hybrid conflicts.

Blame will rightly be laid upon military professionals charged with the nation's security for failure to recognize and accommodate relevant risk in developing future security strategies. The prospect of professional failure rightfully elicits an emotional response within the Army, particularly in senior leaders charged with the stewardship of security. Military professionals are acutely aware that the trust and support of the American people are fleeting and precious commodities. On the whole, the military continues to enjoy overwhelming domestic support. However, national support is a tenuous thread after 8 years of war, and so it is critically important going forward to exercise diligence in the development of future strategy and to get it right. It is essential to future readiness that military strategists maintain grounded professional perspective and deliberate focus on the nature of the evolving threat environment to posture the force. In doing so, it is crucial to keep the national trust in mind with sharp focus on American values and the core security needs of the nation. This responsibility is another reminder of difficult choices about where to accept strategic risk in force posture.

Reinforcing the continued relevance of a superior conventional and nuclear posture, the recent Russia-Georgia conflict is a timely reminder that, while persistent irregular and unconventional threats may be what are expected, the Army should avoid overcorrecting.<sup>50</sup> The key to an effective and affordable security posture is to leverage strengths and prevent a dramatic and risky shift toward unconventional and irregular capabilities.

This is a critical period in U.S. security strategy development when the nation can least afford a lack of vision or to ignore the realities of a world where near-peer conventional threats still exist, technology proliferation and economic friction persist, and where weapons of mass destruction are increasingly likely to become available to both state and nonstate actors. A viable and sensible approach in resource-challenged times, given that every threat cannot be predicted, is to leverage U.S. strengths to effectively narrow the scope of threat options. Doing so imposes a modicum of certainty into the way future conflict will be fought. This approach also recognizes the limits of U.S. resources and considers that compelling economic and domestic realities demand national attention.

## **Summary.**

Looking back at the nation's most recent conflicts, the great volume of analytical effort done prior to Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM was of little use beyond Phase III<sup>51</sup> of these operations.<sup>52</sup> This does not engender confidence in predicting how future conflicts will unfold. This reality reinforces the argument that a thorough consideration of ways and means and accommodation of risk are vitally important in formulating security policy and strategy.

Expectation of an increasingly resource-constrained future requires that the United States continue to accept strategic risk in readiness to conduct missions at the low-to-middle portion of the spectrum of conflict. This means adapting to irregular or unconventional conflicts as they are encountered. As previously asserted, adapting to irregular conflicts may be painful, but history reflects that it is more painful to adapt to major combat operations. Through 8 years of predominantly unconventional conflict in Iraq, the United States has lost more than 4,300 killed.<sup>53</sup> By comparison, the United States

lost over 300,000 Soldiers in a little more than 3 years in World War II, with more than 1,000 Soldiers in only 4 days in the Kasserine Pass.<sup>54</sup>

Capable hybrid and conventional threats remain the most potentially catastrophic danger to U.S. forces and interests. In shaping security strategy for the future, it is imperative that the most potentially catastrophic threats drive force structure. Leadership must consider that adversaries may choose to enter into hybrid or major conflict if their resource needs drive them to confrontation and they perceive that U.S. capabilities have eroded. Leadership must expect adversaries to deny U.S. forces space and time to react and adapt. The critical requirement in posturing U.S. forces for success is to adequately characterize risk to national interests and mitigate risk through leverage of strengths. Doing so will impose some certainty into future conflict and ensure that national security strategy and the supporting military concepts are “not too far wrong.”

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